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Supporting Solid Steps from Higher Education into Sustainable Jobs

Sonja Bekker

Introduction

The current corona crisis seems to be a stress test for the resilience of our society. Having tested the capacity of our health care system first, it has moved on to test our economic and social systems. As such, the crisis exposes much of the cracks and loopholes that were already present before the crisis. This might also be true for our higher education system. While teachers have been making a rapid change to on-line teaching, students have been challenged with ‘learning from a distance’. Simultaneously, students have seen their future perspectives going from excellent to unsure in a matter of months, at least in terms of their likeliness of getting a job soon after graduation. This essay looks at the transition of students into their first jobs and outlines the obstacles and opportunities. It identifies what young people need to become and remain resilient in modern labor markets, and indicates how higher education might support their students.

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Transitions to and at the Labor Market

Success in higher education from a societal perspective may be defined as students being able to finish their studies and to take a step into a good job with career prospects. This idea of success has been defined increasingly as a need to be ‘excellent’. In contrast to the drive for excellence in education, modern labor markets do not always offer ‘excellent’ jobs. Labor markets have changed fundamentally over the past decades. The vast growth of temporary jobs and solo self-employment has made the labor market much more flexible, or even ‘turbulent’.²⁵⁰ Flexibility means that young people no longer flow from school

²⁵⁰ Bekker & Pop (2020).

into a 'job-for-life'. Rather, their first job is temporary, which means that the job has a defined end date. Although such a temporary job may act as a stepping-stone into stable employment, the growing turbulence suggests that this is not always the case. Turbulence refers to frequent transitions in the labor market, going from temporary job to temporary job or from job-to-unemployment-to-job.²⁵¹ Thus, school-leavers frequently hop between internships, temporary agency work, self-employment, temporary jobs, and short-term unemployment, and do not always have the option to choose their pathway or career.²⁵² Therefore, the transition from school-to-work should not be seen as a single moment in time.²⁵³ Rather, the first step after school is the beginning of a transition period where multiple labor market states can occur, reoccur and co-occur.²⁵⁴ Societal and political debates should critically assess the degree of flexibility an economy and society requires. At the same time, both students and higher education should deal with this labor market reality, including its risks and opportunities. The many steps students are likely to take before getting a stable career, means that success will not always come instantly. This also questions whether 'excellence' in education is the only ticket to success. The labor market reality requires more patience, yet also gives more leeway for browsing through several jobs before needing to commit long-term to a profession.

The context in which students move from school to work matters. Labor market institutes are able to support young people.²⁵⁵ Also higher education institutes might prepare students for the labor market. On the one hand, students should learn how to cope with the fluid demands of modern labor markets and not get discouraged if a 'good' job is not landed immediately. Moreover, they should learn how to benefit from flexibility, making sure that a chain of different work experiences with different employers builds their competences and makes them move into better positions. Such virtuous or inclusive transitions are to be preferred over transitions that set young people on a pathway to exclusion or long-term insecurity.²⁵⁶ On the other hand, higher education institutes could offer support to students, by giving them the skills they need to navigate modern labor markets, and by offering them some form of after-care. The lessons from the past economic crisis (2008-2014) and the related spike in youth unemployment, may inform higher education on how to offer labor market support. The lessons also shed light on the role of other relevant labor market institutes.²⁵⁷ This essay summarises these lessons.

²⁵¹ Bekker & Pop (2020).

²⁵² Hartlapp and Schmidt (2008); O'Reilly *et al.* (2018).

²⁵³ Bültmann *et al.* (2020).

²⁵⁴ Bültmann *et al.* (2020), 180.

²⁵⁵ Marsden (2010); Schmid (2015).

²⁵⁶ Schmid (2010).

²⁵⁷ Bekker *et al.* (2020).

Support While Being in Education

The most important role of education might be seen as developing students' knowledge, skills, and competences while enabling them to graduate. This is certainly relevant from a labor market perspective. School-leavers with a diploma have much better chances to navigate the labor market and remain employed (CBS 2019). In keeping young people at school and encouraging them to take their courses and to graduate, higher education thus has an important role in preventing youth unemployment.²⁵⁸ In the past few years, the Netherlands has developed new policies to reduce early school-leaving, making sure that pupils will at least get a starter qualification.²⁵⁹ This starter qualification level is generally seen as a minimum requirement for having reasonably good labor market prospects. Most of the efforts to reduce early school-leaving have been made at the intermediate professional education level (*MBO*), where schools cooperate with municipalities to track down and support young people who were no longer attending school regularly.²⁶⁰ The programs also have preventative elements, from which higher education could learn. These include coaches for young adults who dropped out of school, special groups or classes for youngsters who have doubts about their study choice, guidance in career choices, assistance in finding a job or internship (also for drop-outs), and additional support for pupils who are over-burdened or vulnerable (Rijksoverheid 2020). Also in Dutch higher education, the percentage of students who quit their studies or switch to a new study is relatively high (ResearchNed 2017; Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2009). The reasons for switching studies or leaving higher education vary considerably. These include studies that do not meet the student's expectations, a lack of motivation, or not feeling at home (ResearchNed 2017). Here, universities could play a role in making sure that students feel at home, or make a good move to another study or a job.

Apart from making sure that students graduate, higher education could act as a shelter in times of economic downturn and high youth unemployment. Youth unemployment is often the first one to rise in times of crisis, but also the first one to go down when the economy recovers. The corona crisis is no exception to this rule. In March 2020 the number of Dutch jobs decreased by 23,000, these being predominantly young people's jobs (age 15-20) and temporary or on-call jobs (CBS 2020). By postponing graduation or doing an additional master study, students can delay moving into the labor market and wait until times improve. Such studying in 'slow motion' might not be calculated as a great 'success' in terms of efficiency. Usually, higher education gets credits for navigating students through their programs within a set time. However, for the individual student, it might be a clever strategy to avoid becoming unemployed simply by remaining a student. This strategy transforms into lower youth unemployment at a societal level. Meanwhile, an extra study or additional courses build students' 'human capital', and is therefore not a waste at all.

²⁵⁸ Eichhorst *et al.* 2016.

²⁵⁹ In the Netherlands, this is having a diploma at least level 2 of intermediate professional education, or a high-school diploma at *HAVO* or *VWO* level.

²⁶⁰ Rijksoverheid 2020.

Even better, additional time spent in education might be invested in doing an internship. This contributes to job prospects in the medium term. To explore the latter: vocational education and training (VET) with apprenticeships, or any other initiative that strengthens the link between education, training, and work, benefits the step from school-to-work.²⁶¹ Internships allow students to gain work experience in ‘real’ jobs and with ‘real’ employers while being in school. It gives them relevant skills, such as proper perceptions, attitudes, and behavior regarding work, and also gives them access to a professional network.²⁶² Additionally, job search assistance often improves the transition from school-to-work.²⁶³ At Tilburg University, the Career Centre offers such guidance in finding a job or internship. As students may get this support up until one year after graduation, the university also gives some form of after-care, from which students may benefit greatly.

Support from Labor Market Institutes

Despite youth unemployment currently increasing, most students still find a job after graduation. However, each time people have to make a ‘transition’ to a (new) job, they run the risk of being unsuccessful, and become unemployed. In statistics, unemployed or inactive young people are labeled as NEETs: young people neither in employment nor in education. Within the group of NEETs, seven percent have a high level of education (data 2017 for the Netherlands; CBS 2018). This group is likely to grow given the uncertain economic prospects. Labor market institutes might support these young adults in moving back to school, a job, or an internship. Among the success factors of fighting youth unemployment are personal support within reintegration trajectories, and cooperation between education institutes, employers, and local support services. Moreover, offers of support should be of good quality, matching the capacities and of interest to young adults.

Personal and tailored job finding support is relevant because the group of young unemployed is quite diverse, including differences in educational attainment, (long-term) unemployed, family background, ethnicity, nationality, sex, or health.²⁶⁴ It is therefore relevant to take the social context of youth into account when trying to understand their (failed) transition from school-to-work.²⁶⁵ For instance, young people with mental health and behavioral problems have more difficulties with making the step from school-to-work.²⁶⁶ If you know which groups have the highest risks of becoming unemployed, you can improve policies by targeting these to specific groups.²⁶⁷ This also means that having ‘one-size-fits-all’ programs are less likely to reach their goals. Among successful ingredients

²⁶¹ See, e.g., Eichhorst *et al.* (2016); Tamesberger *et al.* (2014).

²⁶² Chen (2011).

²⁶³ Hadjivassiliou (2017).

²⁶⁴ See, e.g., Yates & Payne (2006).

²⁶⁵ Bynner and Parsons (2002).

²⁶⁶ Rodwell *et al.* (2018).

²⁶⁷ Eichhorst *et al.* (2016).

of reintegration, are personalized counselling, mentoring and on-going support.²⁶⁸ These strongly resemble the success factors of preventing pupils from dropping out of school. A mentor helps young adults to navigate the various (and often complex) administrative systems or to deal with labor market realities. A mentor also offers support throughout the intervention. Although such support seems most needed for vulnerable youth, school-leavers from higher education might benefit from support as well. For instance, mentors could point out job opportunities or introduce them to a network of employers. This also relates to the key lesson that an offer to young unemployed should be of good quality.

Research shows that the cooperation between educational institutes, employers, and local support services (e.g. Public Employment Services, municipalities, social services and health services, trade unions, NGOs, and youth organizations) is beneficial for several reasons. First, cooperation prevents that young people get lost between different policy domains, it avoids service fragmentation and enables integrated services.²⁶⁹ Within such a partnership, organizations can also cooperate to reach out to youth. For instance, if a graduate does not know that Tilburg University offers labor market support in the first year after graduation, it would be helpful if the youth desk of the municipality refers this student to the university's service. A successful example of cooperation in order to offer students work experience after graduation is the Work Experience Grant (WEG).²⁷⁰ This is a Dutch program aiming to improve the job prospects of young adults by providing wage subsidy to increase the number of paid traineeships. It moreover aims to improve the match between demand and supply of traineeships at a regular employer. In practice, the WEG reached predominantly youth with a high level of education. Youth are facilitated to find their own traineeship for a minimum of 32 hours per week and a maximum period of six months. Between June 2014 and May 2017, 2,839 young people participated in a longitudinal study on the effects of the WEG.²⁷¹ One year after completion of their traineeships, 81,9% were employed, most of which had a job that matched education level, skills and also offered good career prospects.²⁷² Factors that predicted positive employment outcomes are quite similar to the lessons learned from the past crisis: the youngster should find the internship relevant (i.e. a good offer), have active job-seeking behavior, and obtain the support of a coach or supervisor. Additionally, young adults with higher social capital and the ability to be adaptable were more likely to secure a job. This latter quality of adaptability could be developed within the scope of higher education as well.

Lastly, success factors do not include the supply-side of labor only, i.e. the young people. They also include the demand-side: the number and quality of jobs that are offered in the labor market. In times of high unemployment, one could think of creating extra jobs for young adults. This could be done via specific taxation or social premium measures that

²⁶⁸ Hadjivassiliou (2017).

²⁶⁹ Hadjivassiliou (2017).

²⁷⁰ See: <http://www.startersbeurs.nl/>; Bekker *et al.* (2020).

²⁷¹ Bekker *et al.* (2020).

²⁷² There is no control group in this study, meaning that there is no data on similar youth who did not follow the WEG program.

facilitate the hiring of young people. Moreover, social partners may conclude collective labor agreements with plans to create additional internships or jobs for youth. Lastly, the rationale of having turbulent labor markets should be reassessed, including a fair analysis of positive and negative aspects of certain forms of flexibility. If young adults and other groups of workers have a better outlook on stable jobs, recurring unemployment might be prevented, giving better opportunities to set course on a 'high road' to better jobs instead of getting on a track that leads to long-term insecurity and exclusion.²⁷³

Conclusion

The transition of students into their first jobs is often a long-lasting transition period where young people interchange between different temporary jobs, unemployment, self-employment, and temporary agency work. The corona crisis worsens the job perspective of young adults. It is therefore of key relevance to discuss the position of young people in our societies, for instance critically assessing the limits of turbulent labor markets and the degree of stability needed to contribute to the resilience of workers. The present economic situation has already resulted in discussions on inclusive income security for all types of workers while limiting types of flexible work that undermine minimal standards.²⁷⁴

Higher education can support students by making them more resilient to modern labor markets. This may be done in different ways, both by preparing students for and supporting them in making steps to the labor market, and in cooperating with local organizations that deal with youth. Luckily the best prevention of unemployment is making sure that students graduate. Having a diploma at higher education level helps tremendously in getting and keeping employment. Still, higher education could offer additional support, for instance via career and study guidance, by facilitating internships, and by building skills to navigate modern labor markets. Also offering some form of after-care for recent graduates is a welcome support. Moreover, in times of crisis, the university could act as a shelter against unemployment by keeping students in education until the economy improves. As such, building youths' resilience and offering support are elements that strengthen each other. This synergy is also visible when young adults become unemployed. Lessons learned on lowering youth unemployment describe a strong combination of offering support and making sure that young people get the skills and network they need to move into the labor market. Higher education could play a role by keeping in touch with recent graduates and by forming strong bonds with other local organisations that support young adults.

²⁷³ See, e.g., Unt and Gabel (2018); Bekker & Leschke (2020).

²⁷⁴ Bekker & Leschke (2020).

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